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"Sound Science" on a Sound Footing

Two Fisheries Researchers Endorse Document behind Effort to Restore Puget Sound

Two researchers from NOAA Fisheries Service in Seattle say in a report that appears today in the scientific journal "Fisheries" that the ongoing ecosystem-wide approach to improving the quality of Washington's Puget Sound is a challenge, but is likely to work in the long run, especially because it involves a range of policy and science leaders.

The authors, Michelle McClure and Mary Ruckelshaus, focus their attention on a document published earlier this year called "Sound Science," which serves as the driving force behind an effort to protect and restore the Puget Sound ecosystem. The effort – estimated to cost in the neighborhood of $300 million in the first two years – is charged with recovering the Sound by 2020. It is led by a unique public-private partnership and a newly-minted state agency established by the state's governor.

"Fisheries management is learning to use more inclusive approaches to deal with the pressures facing our aquatic resources. The ecosystem approach requires input from many stakeholders with different goals," said Gus Rassam, a senior editor of the journal "Fisheries" and American Fisheries Society executive director.

"During the AFS meetings in 2005 and 2007, collaborative approaches were examined in detail. We at AFS are proud to be publishing such cutting-edge papers as the one on Puget Sound," Rassam said.

AFS is the country's oldest and largest professional society representing fisheries scientists.

"Sound Science" was created with the help of more than 30 contributors and benefited from the insight of over 100 natural and social science reviewers representing some 35 organizations -- universities, non-governmental organizations, tribes, county, state and federal agencies, industry and the public.

It emphasizes the strong linkages between land-based and marine systems in Puget Sound. These are environments that typically are studied and managed by different groups. The "Sound Science" document also points out the value of considering both human and natural elements of the ecosystem.

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“As a broadly accepted scientific document, ‘Sound Science’ will play a pivotal role in the state's efforts to recover the Puget Sound," said David Dicks, executive director of the state agency Puget Sound Partnership (PSP) formed in 2007.

"This document's ecosystem-based approach provides a framework for scientists and constituents as they come together to meet the PSP's 2020 Action Agenda,” he said.

The human element is a component, the two Fisheries Service authors say, that is often missing from analyses informing ecosystem-based science, but is a critical one, since management usually depends on changing human behavior.

They add: “’Sound Science’ is a strong foundation for ongoing collaborative scientific work to support the recovery of Puget Sound as a source of natural and social benefits. It will be included in marine biology programs offered at high schools, community colleges and universities. With its comprehensive and straightforward presentation, ‘Sound Science’ will improve public understanding of Washington’s inland marine ecosystem.”

“We hope the regional collaborative process used to develop ‘Sound Science’ can serve as a global model,” said Usha Varanasi, director of NOAA Fisheries’ Northwest Fisheries Science Center. “A shared vision statement among scientists and practitioners about something as complex as an ecosystem can help resource managers move forward in implementing ecosystem-scale management projects nationally and internationally.”

Puget Sound is an important resource within the Pacific Northwest and the nation – it's the nation’s second largest estuary, supporting more than four million residents and a diversity of fish and wildlife populations, including iconic species such as killer whales and Pacific salmon. The sound also plays a vital role in supporting the economy, sustaining industries such as commercial and recreational fishing, aquaculture, tourism, shipping and transportation.

The article, “Collaborative science: moving ecosystem-based management forward in Puget Sound,” can be found at www.fisheries.org/afs/publications/fisheriesmag/3209.pdf.

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